

PROTECTING MEDICARE

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□□□□□□□□□□ As a strong supporter of Medicare, I am aware of its tremendous importance to Southwest Virginia seniors. Throughout my service in Congress I have fought to protect Medicare funding and ensure that the program meets the health care needs of our region's senior citizens.

□□□□□□□□□□ Too often, physicians, particularly those residing in rural areas, find that Medicare reimbursements do not cover the costs they incur in treating Medicare beneficiaries. Physicians have additionally faced annual reductions in Medicare payments as a result of the flawed Sustainable Growth Rate (SGR) payment formula, which was enacted as part of the 1997 Republican Balanced Budget Act.

□□□□□□□□□□ Such dramatic cuts in Medicare funding would adversely affect the quality of health care senior citizens in our region are able to receive. The Ninth Congressional District has 31 percent more Medicare beneficiaries than the typical congressional district, so any Medicare physician payment cuts have a greater effect on the physicians and population of our region than to those in many other parts of the nation.

□□□□□□□□□□ Since 1997, the Congress has intervened each year to cancel the automatic annual cuts, including several temporary extensions that were enacted into law earlier this year. As a result of the formula, however, Medicare payments to physicians were reduced by 21 percent on June 1, 2010.

□□□□□□□□□□ I strongly supported legislation which was approved by the House of Representatives in May eliminating for the long-term the 21 percent reduction which was scheduled to go into effect on June 1. Despite the widespread support which exists for eliminating the payment cuts, the Senate would only agree to an elimination of the payment cuts through the end of November of this year.

□□□□□□□□□□ I am pleased to report that we have now passed legislation in both the House and Senate to eliminate the payment cut until November 30, 2010, and the President has signed the measure into law. The new law is retroactive to June 1, 2010, so doctors will not have their Medicare payments reduced for claims filed between June 1 and June 25, the date the measure was signed into law.

□□□□□□□□□□ The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) temporarily delayed the processing of claims in early June to prevent reductions in physician reimbursements, but the reduction went into effect on June 18. While I am pleased that the new law eliminates the payment reductions retroactively, I regret that the enactment of this vital legislation was delayed in a way that caused unnecessary confusion for physicians and Medicare beneficiaries.

If Congress does not continue to prevent these cuts, more doctors might be unable to continue treating Medicare patients. To ensure that senior citizens in the Ninth Congressional District receive the best health care services possible, last year I strongly supported legislation which was approved by the House of Representatives to replace permanently the flawed SGR formula with a new payment system that will lead to annual payment rate increases. This Senate failed to approve this measure; however, I will continue to work to enact a permanent fix to the Medicare physician payment system which would end the need for annual short-term fixes to the flawed formula.

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